

# Identifying Heterosexism

Actions and Thoughts That May Exhibit Heterosexist Attitudes

J.U.S.T. for Youth

*Stereotypes and assumptions are at the root of heterosexist attitudes, simplifying the diverse LGBT community and often disempowering them. The following actions and thoughts are manifestations of these attitudes.*

## Coalition Members

### Over-Sexualization

- Assuming that lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are only sexual beings rather than complex people who have, among other significant features, a non-heterosexual orientation.
- Assuming that every same-sex attraction is sexual or potentially sexual for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals.
- Assuming that a lesbian, gay man, or bisexual is probably interested in you sexually, regardless of your sexual orientation.
- Interpreting everything lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals do in terms of their sexuality.
- Avoiding touching them or being too close, or being scared of them in general.

### Denying Significance, Politically

- Criticizing LGBT individuals for "making an issue" of their sexuality. For example, commenting, "I don't care what they do in the privacy of their bedrooms, but don't tell me about it."
- Not understanding that in our culture, which is alternatively oblivious to LGBT individuals, or dangerous for them, sexuality is already a political issue.
- Not seeing that heterosexuality is politically supported by giving legal, financial, and emotional privilege to heterosexual relationships while legally denying LGBT individuals involved in same-sex relationships housing, jobs, and child custody.

### Denying Significance, Personally

- Commenting that "it doesn't matter to me that you are LGBT." A basic part of someone's identity and sense of self *should* matter; it just shouldn't matter negatively.
- Expecting people to avoid talking about being LGBT. Expecting them not to talk about their partners or relationships.

- AIDS Delaware
- ACLU of DE
- American Lung Association
- American Psychological Association
- Brandywine Counseling
- Delaware Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- Delaware Council on Gambling Problems
- Delaware Dept. of Services to Children, Youth & Their Families
- Delaware Dept. of Education
- Division of Public Health, School-based Health Centers
- JUST for Youth
- Mental Health Association in Delaware
- National Conference for Community and Justice
- PFLAG of DE
- Planned Parenthood of Delaware
- Public Allies Delaware
- Serviam Media
- Sussex County AIDS Council
- UD Center for Drug and Alcohol Studies
- YES Institute
- YMCA Resource Center
- YWCA

*Adapted from Univ. of Southern Maine's "Safe Zone Project."*

# Labeling Homosexuality/Bisexuality A Problem

- Diagnosing homosexuality/bisexuality, talking about cures or causes, which assumes that it's not normal and natural. A bisexual, lesbian, or gay man may need special support and/or counseling around issues of being non-heterosexual in this culture; however, the problem is heterosexism, not bisexuality/homosexuality.

## Making Invisible

- Assuming that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise.
- Always asking women about boyfriends, and men about girlfriends.
- Assuming that marriage is everyone's goal.
- Keeping bisexuality/homosexuality invisible by not making it safe for people to be "out" or by excluding people who are "out" from visible positions where they might provide positive role models for younger LGBT individuals.
- Denying that bisexuality exists.
- Assuming that heterosexism doesn't exist because you can't see it.
- Considering heterosexism less significant than other oppressions.

The "J.U.S.T. the Facts" series is available at [www.justforyouthde.org](http://www.justforyouthde.org)

## Generalizing

- Assuming that one LGBT individual represents all of them.
- Conversely, completely separating one LGBT individual you know personally by saying, "You're OK: you're not like the rest of them."

## Over-Asserting Your Heterosexuality

- Rushing to talk about your relationship when you meet an LGBT individual to make sure s/he knows you are heterosexual.
- Avoiding behaviors or dress that might cause suspicion that you are not a "real man" or a "real woman."
- Avoiding touching or close friendships with people of the same sex.
- Excusing other heterosexual people's heterosexist jokes or comments.

## Expecting To Be Taught

- Putting the burden of responsibility for educating and working for change on the LGBT individual.
- Forcing LGBT individuals to always take all of the initiative in "coming out."
- Not making openings for people to "come out" by acknowledging in conversations the possibility of non-heterosexual relations.
- Becoming upset if every LGBT individual is not always patient about educating you.

## Mis-defining Bisexuality/ Homosexuality

- Confusing bisexuality with non-monogamy.
- Assuming that bisexuals are fickle or promiscuous.
- Assuming that lesbians hate men.
- Assuming that LGBT individuals want to "convert" heterosexuals.
- Trying to help someone "go straight."
- Thinking of bisexuality/homosexuality as a phase.
- Assuming that lesbians' and gay men's orientation is in reaction to a bad sexual experience.